



SPANISH GOLD TWO FATHOMS DEEP

By JAMES ATWATER

The bizarre story of an ill-assorted band of treasure hunters who found a fortune off Florida's coast.



Divers Mel Fisher and Moe Molinar (with gold disk) at site of wreck. Top of page: a golden doubloon.

The Atlantic Ocean was only 12 feet deep in the area where the two divers were swimming, but the water was so murky that it filtered out nearly all of the light, transforming shapes into shadows and turning the bottom into a darkened desert. Groping around ledges and into pot-holes on the bottom, the men could feel the surge of waves rolling overhead to break on the beaches of Ft. Pierce, Fla. It was May 1, 1964, and the Atlantic was still so chilly that both men wore black, form-fitting, sponge-rubber diving suits. Companions watching from the boat anchored nearby could trace their search along the bottom by the bubbles rising from their Aqua Lunges. Then, suddenly, the bubbles of the leading diver stopped moving and began to rise steadily from the same spot.

The diver, a man named Moe Molinar, had caught sight of a dull gleam on the bottom, half hidden by a layer of sand. He reached down and picked up two roughly shaped disks. One was about six inches in diameter and weighed about six and a half pounds; the other was seven inches across and weighed about seven and a half pounds. They had the tint and glow of gold, but Moe Molinar restrained so many other heavy, glowing objects that had turned out to be brass that he turned anxiously and held them out for inspection to Mel Fisher, the second diver. Fisher saw instantly that they were the real thing. He nodded vigorously at Moe, spat out his mouthpiece and bellowed to the men on the boat, "We hit it!"

What the two men had hit off Ft. Pierce turned out to be the biggest treasure find since 1687 when Sir William Phips, sailing out of Boston, reportedly salvaged \$8,400,000 in loot from a galleon sunk off Hispanola. No one can put an exact value on the treasure taken last spring from the waters off Ft. Pierce, but the most conservative guess the collection is worth at least \$1 million and may be worth several times that.

Within the space of a few weeks the treasure divers brought up, in addition to the two disks, approximately 3,500 gold coins, many of them so rare that none like them had ever been seen by modern collectors, as well as two long, intricately worked gold chains and about 120 pounds of silver coins fused together by the action of the sea.

The story behind the finding of the Ft. Pierce wreck is a wild mixture of science, scholarship and sheer luck, of amateurs born with the golden touch and of professionals who seemed fated to failure. It is a story which includes such bizarre ingredients as a diver named Demosthenes, a bearded undercover agent, and a man with an abiding passion for the rare and graceful shell of the *Spandilus Americus*.

Photographer takes the treasure hunters show off the haul. Irregularly shaped silver pieces are "cruas" cut from bars of silver.



Using native divers, the Spanish managed to retrieve about \$4 million in treasure. But pirates and poachers also worked the wreck, with the result that to this day no one knows for sure how much loot is left in the water. Amazingly, although historians and map makers recorded the site and scope of the disaster, no one seems to have made a serious effort to salvage what was left of the treasure until recently.

For decades the only material raised from the wreck was the occasional scraps of metal that caught in a fisherman's net, or shards of pottery, or a stray coin or two found by a diver out for a Sunday-afternoon lark. Then, around 1949, a man named Kip Wagner in nearby Sebastian began wondering about the riches that might lie just offshore. Central casting in Hollywood would never have picked Wagner to be a treasure hunter. There is nothing dashing or debonair about him. For years he has worked as a block layer and plasterer. He was not even a seafaring man, although he later learned to dive with scuba gear. Wagner did, however, have a serious interest in Florida's past: at one point, for example, he retraced de Soto's journeys through the state. This concern for history was about all that set Wagner apart from any other industrious plater with a pickup truck—this and what proved to be a remarkable knack for retaining control of an increasingly slippery situation.

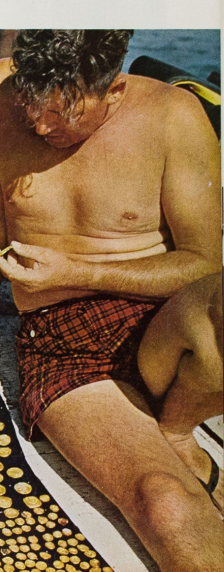
At 59, Wagner has the powerful, rough-skinned hands of his old trade, but he looks more like a gracefully aged gym instructor. The overall impression he normally gives is one of immaculate whiteness—his pants are white, his T-shirt is white and his crew-cut hair is white. At his most loquacious Wagner is a soft-spoken, tactful man, and these days he is saying nothing at all about his treasure hunting. He is not interested in the publicity, he says.

Back when he first started dreaming of sunken treasure, Wagner was plying his trade in a kind of partnership with another Sebastian man, Lisbon Futch. "I was a carpenter who hated to lay blocks," says the 66-year-old Futch, "and Kip was a block layer and plasterer who hated carpentry. So we got along pretty good."

Wagner interested Futch in the wreck, and together they bought some surplus Army mine detectors and began to spend weekends walking the beaches looking for coins. Sometimes they would go out at the height of a storm, bent over by the 50-pound weight of their equipment, wading the long way in front of them and waiting for the destructive dentist's drill sound in their earphones that indicated some kind of metal was just ahead. Over the years they found some silver coins—several dozen of them—but it was strictly a beachcomber's approach to treasure hunting.



Treasure hunters Del Long, Dan Thompson examine the last day's haul—1,073 coins.



Demosthenes Fisher, wife of the salvage group's captain, Mel Fisher, holds large gold disk.



A storm nearly sank the salvage boat the day they first found gold.

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knew of a surplus Navy launch they could buy for \$3,000. "You want to get out on that damn ocean?" I asked him," says Futch. "Well," says Kip, "I'd do anything to get out there."

"Well," says I, "he's got to look at it, and if it suits us we'll buy it." So they bought the launch and began to search for treasure in earnest. By this time Wagner had become an expert on the 1715 fleet, having obtained microfilm copies of documents from the Spanish archives. Around this time Wagner also began to enlist others in his informal treasure-hunting group, including a number of men from Cape Canaveral, located only 40 miles up the coast from Sebastian. Eventually, Wagner, Futch and seven others formed the Real Eight Salvage Co., named for *occho reales*, the Spanish term for pieces of eight.

At this point Wagner also made what has turned out to be the wisest decision in the whole complicated affair. This was to observe one of the most neglected and abused laws in Florida's history—a regu-

lation requiring treasure hunters to apply for leases before searching the state's waters, which extend three miles out into the Atlantic. Because the applicants must agree to give the state 25 percent of whatever they salvage, many treasure hunters have blantly ignored the requirement. Sebastian south past Ft. Pierce and on to Stuart, some 40 miles in all. This lease was nonexclusive—other persons could explore in the area if they could get a similar lease—and it did not permit the exclusive salvage lease on one wreck that proved to be part of the 1715 fleet, and in 1961 he applied for and received similar leases on two other wrecks.

Working the three wrecks, Wagner's group had some success. His lease began to fall apart as the year wore on, and he was left to fill up with olive jars and remnants of pottery, and three encrusted cannon were casually dropped at one end of his yard. Real Eight found some silver bars, a magnificent, eight-strand gold necklace, lumps of oxidized silver coins, a number of gold coins and some ancient porcelain.

Like the Spanish salvagers centuries before, Wagner's group attracted a lot of attention, and their sites were raided by poachers. One of the leased wrecks, in fact, was so close to shore that it was scarcely covered at low tide, and could be reached by wading. But Real Eight's main problem was not so much the pirates as the fact that it did not have the proper equipment to move the sand that buried nearly all of the treasure. Moreover, the men simply did not have enough free time to work the wrecks. All of them had regular jobs, and they had to be doing on weekends—if the water was not too murky. Early in 1963 Wagner began to fear that, at the rate they were going, he might not live to see the treasure that he knew was out there. He and his partners decided that they needed some full-time professional help to hit it big. Right at hand was one of the few men in the country who met their needs, a California diver named Mel Fisher.

Fisher, whom Wagner had met several years before—all serious treasure hunters seem to know each other—is a tall, powerfully built man with a solid pocket face. Like Wagner, Fisher was driven by an

obsession to find treasure—an obsession that had survived a long series of expensive failures. For the past six years he had searched for treasure in a 65-foot boat named the *Golden Doubloon* without finding a single golden doubloon.

But Fisher had succeeded in one thing. In the course of his expeditions he had put together a well-balanced team of experienced men who had worked with him off and on, and who came as close as any group in the world to deversing the name of professional treasure hunters. Fisher and his crew had developed two devices for treasure hunting that appealed to Wagner. The first was a metal detector so sensitive it could distinguish between different metals. It was the creation of an electronics expert named Fry Field, whose initial interest in designing the gear had nothing to do with finding gold. Fisher and his wife are devoted hunters of the handsome shell of the spiny oyster, *Spandilus Americus*, which is frequently found near shipwrecks. "When we went on a vacation trip, we needed some assurance we would find a wreck so we would find some shells," says Fisher. He therefore set about putting together a detector that would locate wrecks, a talent that naturally fascinated Fisher when he learned about it.

Fisher's second device interested Wagner even more. This was a new kind of dredge for digging up the ocean floor, so superior to the standard pumps and excavators that it amounts to a technological breakthrough in treasure hunting. Designed by Fisher, it had been built by Dick Williams, the group's mechanic. Fisher had the manpower, the gear and the know-how, and Wagner had the leases, and in the spring of 1963 they worked out a deal. Fisher and his group would do all of the work. After the state received its 25 percent, the remainder would be split evenly between Fisher's and Wagner's groups. Under the name Treasure Salvors, Inc., Fisher gathered together eight of the best men he had ever worked with, and each of them agreed to work for a year without pay.

To finance the search, Fisher sold the *Golden Doubloon*, his home in California, and the scuba-diving equipment business there which in recent years had been one of his main sources of income. Treasure Salvors then bought a battered old white workboat and began diving operations. But for all its science and technology, the Wagner-Fisher team still did not make a big strike. The partners needed someone to lead them to the site of a really rich wreck. Unknown to them, a third group of men was working on an off Ft. Pierce in an area that was never really scouted, although it was within the boundaries of one of the leases. In fact, Ward had been diving in the area so frequently that he now customarily referred to it as "my wreck."

Early in 1963 Ward met Don Neiman, a housefather at the Florida State School for the Deaf in Oklawaha. By the early summer of 1963 Ward and Neiman

the sea might have tossed up. Neiman, a son of an Irish immigrant, was also a collector of fossils and Indian artifacts. He has, he says, a knack for finding strange things in the sand. "I found a Chinese coin in the Oklawaha woods," he says. "I have some kind of lucky charm. If there's anything hidden in that grass over there, I could go over and find it."

Together, Ward and Neiman began working the beaches near "Ward's" wreck with portable detectors. One day Neiman was walking casually along the bluffs at the rear of the beach when he felt the telltale drilling sound in his earphones. "I thought, why not dig up the more bottle cap," he says. "I dug down with my finger and there was a perfect eight *cruas* gold piece. It took me a couple of minutes to get my breath and my mouth open and looked at it."

In addition to the eight *cruas* coin, Neiman made several other finds, which he recorded on his detector like a lighter pilot chalking up kills on the side of his plane—the detector beeps seven stripes for eight coins, five for gold. By the early summer of 1963 Ward and Neiman

were convinced that the wreck offshore was part of the 1715 fleet, but they had no way to work the bottom. They went to a coin collector in Orlando named Frank Allen, a high-school history teacher who was looking for ways to invest some money he had made. Neiman says that Allen agreed to finance a modest search. Diving from a 14-foot boat, Ward and Neiman managed to locate the scattered ballast stones of the wreck.

It was only then that the three learned that Kip Wagner was also hunting for wrecks along the coast, with an experienced group of divers and professional equipment. The three men promptly presented themselves to Wagner to see what kind of a deal they could work out. Allen says that Wagner was staggered by the news that they had found the coins. "He walked up and down saying, 'This is what I was afraid of—this is what I used to wake up at night dreaming about for years. Thank God you came to me!'" says Allen. "He was afraid that some amateurs would find some coins, sell them cheaply and ruin the market."

The two groups soon struck a bargain. Wagner would supply the diggers and

take 60 percent of whatever was found at the site; the rest would go to Allen, Neiman and Ward in return for their disclosure of the wreck's location. For a while in the summer of 1963 Treasure Salvors worked the site, but with nearly total lack of success. Then Fisher became fed up with spending so much effort on a vaguely defined site that would yield his group such a small percentage of any find, and threatened to quit unless the 60-40 agreement were revised. In the end Allen, Ward and Neiman agreed to accept only 10 percent, with 90 percent going, half and half, to Wagner's and Fisher's groups. "It was quite a comedown," says Allen. "But we decided that ten percent of something is better than forty percent of nothing."

Fisher and his men went back to the site, but for the rest of the fall and all through the winter, storms kept the water too dirty for any salvage work. The group spent its time refining its equipment and charting the locations of some 50 other wrecks in the area. Then came the first of May, when Fisher and Demosthenes (Moe) Molinar, a Panamanian who is one of Treasure Salvors' top divers,



Examining some of the find: Frank Allen, highway patrol Capt. Riddick, Kip Wagner, Mel Fisher, Carl Clauson, Rippe-Gates and Florida state inspector Paul Baldwin.

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found the two disks on the site of "Ward's" wreck. After the long year of unproductive work the first sight of success gave the crew a virulent case of gold fever. When Molinar surfaced with a disk, Rippe-Gates, Fisher's second-in-command, admits that he did not waste time congratulating the diver. "I almost put my foot on his head to push him back in the water to go down and find some more," says Gates.

Gates and nearly everyone else splashed overboard to take up the hunt, but there was no more gold to be found that day. In fact, the time spent on the bottom nearly wrecked the expedition, for the divers did not notice a gathering squall until Fisher suddenly spotted a water spout nearby. The storm hit hard. "I thought, 'My gosh, do the Aztecs have a curse on it?'" says Walt Halvorth, a former construction supervisor who is one of the group's divers. "We were really scared the boat might go down."

After this tantalizing glimpse of possible riches, the men had to suffer the frustration of sitting on shore and waiting for the weather and the water to clear. On May 15, they finally put to sea again, but for nearly a week they found only a scattering of coins. Then, on May 21, they found 215 gold coins and on May 24 another 1,073. All day long the divers stuffed coins into their gloves and surfaced to dump them in clattering, glittering cascades on the deck of the workboat.

Another operator came to town with a huge pendulum that would swing at random until it scented gold, whereupon it would quickly line up on the precious metal. Or so he said.

The State of Florida, meanwhile, did its best to keep an eye on Fisher's operations—in which it had a 25 percent interest. The state's secret weapon in this endeavor was a highway-patrol captain with a rare zeal for his work. At one point, for example, a bearded stranger appeared on the deck of a sailboat moored near Fisher's salvage boat. After a few days of quietly watching the treasure hunters working on their equipment, he struck up an acquaintance with the men and was invited aboard. It was, of course, the redoubtable police captain—just making sure that all was well.

Although the divers continued to haul up coins by the hundred, the process of salvaging a fortune from the sea soon turned into a dirty, exasperating chore. There was no "wreck" to salvage, no hull lying on the floor of the ocean. Teredos—sea worms—had long ago devoured the hull and nearly every other piece of wood. About all that was left was metal—cannon and coins and fragments of fittings—and these were all buried under at least three or four feet of sand.

The divers removed the sand with their dredge, which could dig a hole 10 feet wide, 15 feet long and 10 feet deep in about 20 minutes. These holes were as gloomy as graves, and the divers, feeling their way around the sides, constantly touched off caverns that gripped their legs like quicksand.

The men did much of their work on their hands and knees, clutching the bottom with one hand to keep themselves in place against the surge of the waves and the suction of the dredge. The swirling sand filled in their ears solid, stuck in their hair and worked its way inside their diving suits, where it grated like sandpaper. The men had to fan the loose sand away from the bottom until their hands were lined with cuts and scrapes. After the first rich harvest, which lasted for about 10 days, the coins began to run out. For weeks Fisher continued to the job to see that the artifacts were brought up correctly. But by midsummer, Fisher concluded that his divers had just about picked the wreck clean. The hurricane season was beginning, and he decided to call it quits and look into the subject of selling the treasure.

The gold was in magnificent condition. No one could estimate what the coins would bring at a sale, and Wagner and Fisher agreed that the safest way of handling the collection was to sell the whole thing to one man, who could then donate it to a museum and write off the venture as a magnificent tax deduction. Learning of the find, the Smithsonian Institution began hunting for just such a public-spirited collector with a tax problem.

While the search went on for such a benefactor, Wagner and Fisher could not resist the temptation to offer some of the coins for sale. They accordingly arranged for an auction, which was held on October 8 in a waterfront restaurant in Hoboken, N.J., near the office of auctioneer Henry Christensen, one of the country's foremost experts on Spanish coins.

The price coins stirred brisk competition among three oddly assorted collectors. At a table toward the rear of the room sat Frank Allen, who had joined the Treasure Salvors group and had an envelope in his inside pocket brimming with \$18,000 in cash. Next to him sat John J. Pascale, president of the Quality Tool and Die Co., Inc., of Hoboken ("Quality is our product"), who admitted that the auction was his first real foray on coins. Pascale, who wore a white-on-white checkered shirt and flicked the pages of his catalogue as though they were cards in a gin-rummy hand, said he figured that collecting Spanish coins was a safer hobby than raising pheasants, which he also does. "The birds get sick."

You lose three, four thousand pheasants at \$1 each," he said, "you figure it out." At the front of the room sat F. Xavier Calico of Barcelona, one of the world's leading collectors and coin dealers. A handsome little man with a small white moustache and graying hair combed straight back from his forehead, he pulled solemnly on his pipe and stared around at the room over a pair of half-lens spectacles. Bidding with a courtly nod of his head, Calico took the best coins, paying \$3,600—the highest price of the auction—for a four *reales* piece so rare that it had never been catalogued.

Altogether, Calico contributed about \$17,000 to the auction's total take of slightly over \$50,000 for 107 coins. Some-

one suggested that, after 250 years, some of the coins might finally make it to Spain. Señor Calico gave a wry laugh. "I bought only for other collectors," he said. "Not one customer is in Spain. No collectors there could afford them. These coins are definitely lost to Spain."

This month Treasure Salvors plans to auction off 14 more coins in London. Even as the sale is taking place, Mel Fisher and his divers hope to be raising more coins from the bottom of the ocean. Working this time without Wagner, the group has a salvage lease on what Fisher is convinced is a Spanish galleon named the *San Fernando*, which was part of a treasure fleet that piled up on the Florida Keys during the hurricane of 1733. Fisher learned about the wreck last fall while searching through the old Spanish archives that record the fates of the great treasure fleets.

"Apparently the Spaniards never were able to locate the *San Fernando* to salvage it," says Fisher, "and no one else ever did either. The ship was supposed to be carrying \$800,000 worth of treasure."

Fisher plans to work the *San Fernando* this winter. Then, in the spring, when the weather turns fair and the water starts to clear, he and his men intend to return to Ft. Pierce and resume the hunt for Spanish gold that comes glistening out of the sea as perfect as it was on the day it left the mists in Mexico City and Lima 250 years ago.

THE END

A single coin salvaged from the wreck was sold for \$3,600.



Salvors Dick Williams and Mel Fisher sort through coins brought up during the day.